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Chapter 3: Towards a Theory of Historical Reflexivity

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Abstract

Researchers in the field of historical organization studies (HOS) have hinted at the role of reflexivity in history research. However, the benefits of merging ideas of reflexivity with history remain unexplored and theoretically under-developed. In this chapter, we introduce an initial theory of *historical reflexivity* that combines knowledge from HOS, emotion in organizations, and an intersubjective perspective on being reflexive. We explain and elaborate on the meaning and purpose of historical reflexivity as theory within HOS, and we illustrate the concept with an example of 'faculty career achievement' in the corporatized university. In the concluding section of the chapter, we consider the utility of our model for HOS and discuss implications for both research and practice.

Introduction

Researchers in the field of 'historical organization studies' (HOS) (Maclean, Harvey and Clegg, 2016) have hinted at the role of *reflexivity* in history research (Stutz and Sachs, 2018; Barros, Carneiro and Wanderley, 2018). However, the benefits of merging ideas of reflexivity with history remain unexplored and theoretically under-developed. In this chapter we propose the concept of *historical reflexivity*. This idea stems from an assumption that history is both socially constructed knowledge of the past (Jenkins, 1991) and ontologically enactive. In other words, we perform history as we compose our lives in the present, which shapes visions for the future and of the past (Durepos, 2015).

The increased attention to history in organization studies is evident in the proliferation of research on the history of organizations and management thought, narratives and memory (Mills, 2006; Wren and Bedeian, 2017; Bowden, 2018; Rowlinson, Casey, Hansen and Mills, 2014). A variety of methods have been developed to undertake this research, including: microhistory (Novicevic, Marshall, Humphreys and Seifried, 2018), rhetorical history (Suddaby, Foster and Quinn Trank, 2010), archival ethnography (Decker, 2014), historical hermeneutics (Taylor, 2015), and ANTi-History (Durepos, 2015). A central concern in the field has been to outline the role that studying the past of organizations can play in developing ideas and innovations for

organizations in the future (Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard and Rowlinson, 2017; Lawrence, 1984). Despite this concern, there is no extant historically sensitive framework that theoretically connects the past, present and future.

In contrast to mainstream histories, which are ontologically realist, epistemologically positivist, and privilege reason and rationality (Bowden, 2018), historical reflexivity recognises the everyday practice of histories rather than relying on the historian as keeper of the past (Kalela, 2012; Trouillot, 1995). This idea is inspired by the extent to which notions of reflexivity and history already inform one another. For example, reflecting on history as past and present is central to the practice of reflexivity. Conversely, reflexivity has been drawn upon by postmodern HOS researchers to expose and problematize ‘historical truths’ and reveal them as one of many ‘situated knowledges.’ We feel that merging history with reflexivity in an explicit way holds promise to help HOS mature as a community of practice.

We define historical reflexivity in the following terms:

(a) Historical reflexivity is an iterative process of reflection in which people create nonchronological narratives of their past, present and future practices, informed by their embodied history.

(b) Some narratives feature comprehensions (we apprehend, experience and realise) while others feature compositions (we accomplish, make happen and enact). The process is iterative in the sense that the focus is on the co-creation of narratives of comprehension and composition, with an understanding that alterations to each shifts our embodied history. Embodied history is a sedimentation of narratives over time, which become adopted, accepted as given, and consequently seem natural. Therefore, their ongoing historicity is forgotten or ignored.

(c) Historical reflexivity opens the possibility for people to simultaneously invent historical narratives for change; and to guard historical narratives that sustain established order. These narratives connect with emotions that are surfaced through the ‘unsettling’ practice of reflexivity. As a theoretical construct, historical reflexivity invites scholars to question the impact of emotions and nonchronological histories on our knowledge of taken for granted aspects of individual and social practice.

We explain and develop this definition in the following sections of the chapter. First, we map our theoretical development of historical reflexivity through a description of the literatures on HOS, emotion in organizations, and reflexivity that inform our definition. Using these literatures, we construct a theoretical model of historical reflexivity (see Figure 1, below). We discuss and illustrate each element of our model in detail. We then illustrate the model with an example of ‘faculty career achievement’ in the corporatized university. In the concluding section of the chapter, we consider the utility of our theoretical model for HOS and discuss some implications for research and practice.

Theory Development

We provide a summary of the areas of existing knowledge that create our theoretical model. This gives the reader an introduction to both the current state of knowledge and the functioning of our theory in relation to knowledge development. Effective theories in organization studies generally have two primary characteristics, they should be original and useful. The originality of a theory stems from the creation of insights that reveal new ways of understanding. The utility of a theory recognizes that such insights need to be practical and applicable. Theoretical development, therefore, aims to be prescient; it is focused on ‘the process of discerning what we need to know’ (Corley and Gioia, 2011: 23). Theory captures the intersection between its explanatory power to inform and guide, its relevance to current and emerging issues, and its role in the discovery of novel connections (Clancy and Vince, 2019). Simply put, ‘a good theory explains, predicts and delights’ (Sutton and Staw, 1995: 378).

Our theoretical model is built by making links between three aspects of knowledge that are currently separate. First, HOS is a field of ‘organizational research that draws extensively on historical data, methods, and knowledge, embedding organizing and organizations in their sociohistorical context to generate historically informed *theoretical narratives* attentive to both disciplines...’ (Maclean et al., 2016: 609, *our emphasis*). However, these narratives are not exclusively located in how the past informs the present. They can be nonchronological in the sense that they are created from aspects of the past and the present, as well as (spoken and unspoken) desires concerning the future. We therefore require theory that helps us to recognise how people in organizations comprehend and perform history nonchronologically, as well as how we compose our lives in the present and connect with our lived experience of organizations.

Second, our lived experience is created and sustained through our emotional, as well as rational, responses to organizations. Contemporary research into emotions and organizations provides a range of insights about the emotional nature of such responses. For example, they might arise from powerful, internalised feelings of self-hatred (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012) or envy (Stein, 2016). They may evolve from social emotions, which are emotions that reflect the state of social relations and hold people together in organizational processes. For example, social feelings of shame (Creed et al, 2014) or fear (Gill and Burrow, 2018). They may occur from moral emotions that lead people to care about a social environment and, therefore, to support and improve its integrity. For example, notions of patient care that influence surgeons’ field level maintenance of professional practice (Wright et al, 2017) (see the chapter by Sakai in this volume), or the anger that motivates peoples’ involvement in a human rights organization (Rodgers, 2010). We think that knowledge about emotions in organizations can be significant, especially because the role of emotions is increasingly noticed in the field of history (Boddice, 2018) but has been neglected in HOS. We argue for a theory that unsettles a need for a neutral, disembodied historian who draws on historical data dispassionately to construct an *emotion-free* narrative. Our theory offers a counter-perspective, that history is intimately connected to lived experience; it is produced in daily actor practices and relations that reveal an *emotion-full* narrative of organizational contexts.

Third, emotion-full narratives of lived experience are grounded in reflexivity, which involves ‘questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted – what is being said and not said – and examining the impact this has or might have’ (Cunliffe, 2016b: 741). Reflexivity concerns

our wish to comprehend the nature of the knowledge we produce, and that produces us. It is about our lived experience of *being* reflexive, both for ourselves, and in relation to others. Reflexivity is bound with praxis. It suggests a ‘need for self-conscious and ethical action based on a critical questioning of past actions and of future possibilities’ (Cunliffe, 2016a: 749). A likely outcome of such action and reflection on the past and future is emotions of insecurity that are ‘unsettling’, both of self and other. Being unsettled can both open up opportunities for new ways of working, and it can provoke resistance from the established order in support of current ways of working. Applied to an organizational context, reflexivity encourages us to unsettle what and how we know, and disrupt the systems of domination that prevent us from knowing more or knowing differently. We therefore require theory that is capable of supporting an understanding of lived experiences in organizations that perceives people as both the inventors of historical narratives for change, and as the guardians of enduring historical narratives that are associated with the maintenance of prevailing order.

In summary, our development of a theory of historical reflexivity is built from three connected themes that link HOS, emotions in organizations, and being personally and relationally reflexive. Such a theory aims to:

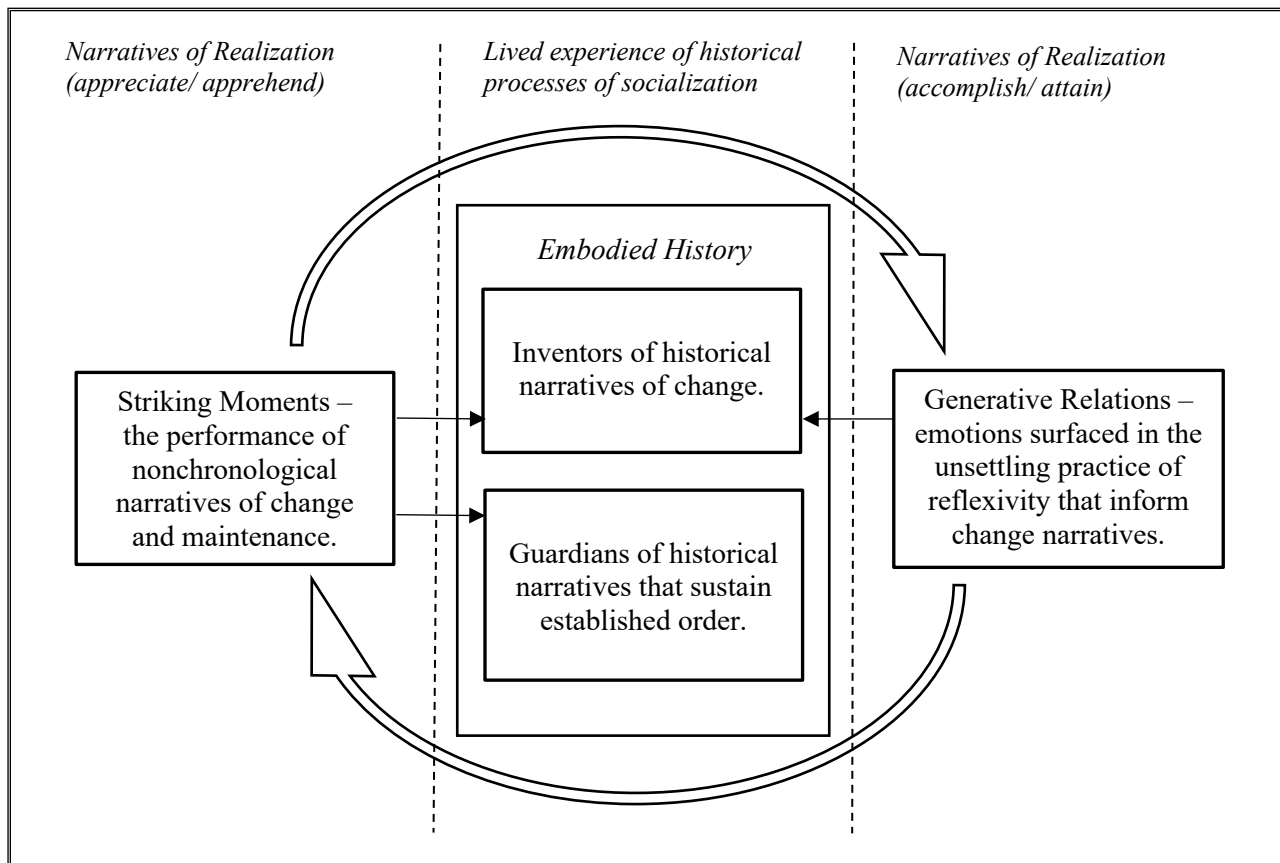
- help us to anticipate how people in organizations comprehend and perform history nonchronologically, as well as how we compose narratives of our lives in the present and connect with our lived experience of organizations.
- help us to produce emotion-full narratives of the ways in which history is intimately connected to peoples’ lived experience, as it is produced in everyday practice.
- help us to pinpoint a historical perspective on being reflexive. This involves our experience as inventors of historical narratives of change, and as guardians of historical narratives that are associated with established order.

Historical reflexivity focuses on the process of ‘unsettling’ in relation to the past, present and future. For example, practicing historical reflexivity can help us question assumptions of progress that impose a ‘chronological order’ on events, with the assumption that the next event is an improvement on the previous one. Historical reflexivity unsettles the notion of progress by exposing it as provisional and nonchronological. We present a novel view of the relationship between historical perceptions (as recursive) and the ongoing questioning of underlying assumptions. We show how this can inform and support practices that unsettle assumptions and invite possibilities for change.

Towards a Theory of Historical Reflexivity

Our theoretical model of historical reflexivity is presented visually in Figure 1 (below). We explain and develop each of the main components of our model in more detail, as well as showing how these components work together.

Figure 1: A Model of Historical Reflexivity



Our explanation of historical reflexivity highlights two interlinked ‘narratives of realization’. Here we are using the ambiguity of the verb *to realize* to make a link between nonchronological history and reflexivity. There are two senses to this verb. First, realize means to understand (to comprehend) and second, to make happen (to compose). These meanings also connect history and reflexivity in the sense that they suggest a process of *being in history* rather than looking back on it chronologically. Our model, therefore, mirrors frameworks for learning that are based on the continuous interplay of reflection and action (Kolb, 1983), as well as frameworks of scholarship that emphasize the inseparable link between theory and practice. In the midst of narratives of realization are historical processes of socialization, or ‘structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 72), which are frames of cognition, perception, preference, language and action that incline persons towards specific forms of organizational order. Structuring structures are bound up with emotions, for example, ‘shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt’ (Bourdieu, 2004: 340), which contribute to both the subversion and the reproduction of institutional order (Vince and Mazen, 2014). Structuring structures and their associated process of socialization, as Bourdieu (1990: 56) notes, can become ‘embodied history’ in that they are internalized, accepted as given with their ongoing historicity forgotten or ignored.

Narratives of Realization: Comprehension

Historical reflexivity invokes a nonchronological history rather than one organized around chronological time. While the HOS literature offers various options to emplot reflection and narratives of the past as history (i.e. give a structure that sets events in a given ‘order’), historical reflexivity is aligned with the postmodern HOS idea that chronology in historical analysis is imposed and achieved, rather than given in the natural unfolding of things (White, 1985). Our notion of historical reflexivity suggests that an ongoing connection between time and history imposes a progressive order that is not necessarily representative of events or their consequences (individual or collective). This raises a question concerning the practicalities of historical reflexivity: what tools do we need to articulate a nonchronological view of history, one that can unsettle time ordered chronology rather than one that remains dependent on it?

We answer this question by considering the performance of nonchronological narratives as they apply to efforts at changing and maintaining those structures that structure. We think that moments are not tied together in time, but rather reflect the present or resonate with the past depending on their intensity. Therefore, narratives of realization associated with comprehension are performed through practical reflexivity on ‘striking moments’ (Corlett, 2013) in our lives (our being) through which we get a sudden or emerging insight, one that suggests new connections in relation to existing patterns of events (Cunliffe, 2002). Such moments confront us with realization. These are felt moments, when both conscious and unconscious emotions surface and give tone, significance and shape to practical reflexivity. The instances that are re-lived in striking moments do not present themselves in the chronological order in which they were initially experienced. Striking moments arise from noticing what would otherwise remain unnoticed about thought processes unfolding over time, values that are within and beyond their time, and shared connections with the future. For example, Reynolds and Vince (2020) reflexively engage with twenty-seven papers, which is the sum of their collective scholarship within one journal, *Management Learning*, over a period of 50 years. This unusual act of reflexive inquiry produces anachronisms (things that are out of their time), uncanny resonances between past and present, and anticipatory connections that imagine and predict future possibilities.

While some striking moments evoke sentiments of plausibility, others can lead to emotional and cognitive disconnects and discomfort. Striking moments have the potential to surface discord between what were once internalized, unconscious, and accepted mental patterns and dispositions that are now consciously felt. These moments can be jarring because they are an opportunity for an emotional dissonance to surface between the sensemaking of what is, what was and what can or should be. Striking moments have the capacity to disrupt our emotional and behavioural steadiness. This instability can be characterized by experiencing the pleasant excitement of plausibility or the unpleasant emotions of hurt, anger, and pain in reconciling both real and imagined past, present, or future events. We think that striking moments can occur at individual and collective levels of engagement. In both cases, it is the power of these reflexive moments that unsettles expectations and supports insightful, imaginative, and predictive possibilities. Striking moments are important because they emphasise the possibility of different connections to what is apparent; and the potential to become conscious of contextually specific elements of underlying processes of socialization.

Narratives of Realization: Composition

Historical reflexivity emphasises the power of our emotional lives and our capacity to construct emotional narratives that are both informed by our past, and intimately connect our present and futures. While striking moments highlight immediate or emerging narratives of conscious realization, not all moments of realization are conscious. Our conceptualization of historical reflexivity also implies connection to a broader idea, that each person is, at every moment, under the influence of their entire history (Ford and Harding, 2009). This acknowledges the complexities of our individual and relational lives, that we are connected to histories that are both real and imagined; to relations, contexts, and emotions that continuously combine and recombine into new configurations. This has been referred to by the psychoanalytic theorist, Christopher Bollas, as ‘psychic genera... clusters of internal intensity that are created when related ideas, images, and feelings are attracted together’ (Nettleton, 2017: 15).

What we take from this, for our theoretical model, is the importance of the generative nature of associative relations, and the fundamental role of emotions (both conscious and unconscious) as a creative aspect of reflexive engagement in organizations. Our lived experience of organizations does not only stimulate defences against emotions. It also offers us glimpses of the importance of our organizational dreamworlds (Gabriel, 1995; Vince, 2018) and the receptiveness and creativity of an *associative* mind. For example:

‘The creation of the dream is not only a remarkable aesthetic accomplishment; it is the most sophisticated form of thinking we have. A dream can think hundreds of thoughts in a few seconds, its sheer efficiency breathtaking. It can think past, present and imagined future in one single image and it can assemble the total range of implicit affects within the day experience...’ (Bollas, 2007: 73).

The idea of the creativity of an associative mind is important for HOS because one’s sense of self and other in organizations is formed unknowingly (as well as knowingly) within a social and political context, and outside of distinctions between past, present and future. Historical reflexivity seeks to identify the generative nature of associative relations that arise from a nonchronological perspective on history; and that ‘we are all part of a matrix of relations in a social group, where certain ways of perceiving reality are impressed on individuals without proper conscious awareness of that influence’ (Stamenova and Hinshelwood, 2018: 2). We consider these ‘generative relations’, as we call them, to be capable of both unsettling narratives of order and creating possibilities for change. We illustrate this theme in our upcoming example.

Historical reflexivity offers HOS the option to consider an additional perspective to the idea that organizational history is best understood through the rational analysis undertaken by unbiased historians. It supports a choice to analyse history as it is produced in daily actor practices, and to continue to develop the neglected role of emotions in HOS (Stoler, 2009; Boddice, 2018). Histories are performed in daily practices by emotive humans, and those emotions profoundly influence what can be realized through our actions (Vince, 2006).

Embodied History

We contend that there is an ongoing relationship between everyday practice and processes of socialization that become ‘embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). ‘Embodied history’ as it is conceptualized in historical reflexivity, is an example of a nonchronological history, where past, present and future combine to assist *both* with the internalization of organizational order and with the questioning of assumptions that underpin order. Historical narratives serve dual and contradictory purposes. They function both as narratives that maintain established order and narratives of potential change.

Historical reflexivity is connected to our being within a social and political context, to historical processes of socialization and to the possibility of unsettling them. Our narratives of realization, whether about comprehension or composition, are both structuring structures that act upon us to generate and organize practices and representations. However, our acts anticipate the future at the same time as they are framed by previous experience, affording opportunities for ‘questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted – what is being said and not said – and examining the impact this has or might have’ (Cunliffe, 2016b: 741). Cunliffe’s (2016a: 749) insight into the process of reflexivity is important exactly because it is based on concurrent ‘critical questioning of past actions and of future possibilities’ that can give rise to striking moments and generative relations. A likely outcome of such reflection and action on the past and future are emotions of insecurity that are ‘unsettling’, both of self and other. Being unsettled can open up possibilities for new ways of being, and provoke resistance within an established order in support of current ways of thinking.

In the context of our lived experience of processes of socialization, organizational actors are often free to think differently within the constraints of having to think the same. Reflexivity implies interrogation of contradictory purposes, questioning both our freedoms and constraints within a given organizational order. Reflexivity invites persons to ‘deconstruct our own constructions of realities, identities, and knowledge, and highlight the intersubjective and indexical nature of meaning’ (Cunliffe, 2003: 989). Such questioning of personal and social constructions is important because, if our thoughts are internalized and accepted, they come to iteratively inform our being – in relation to self, to others, and to society. Reflexivity (certainly in the sense of ‘deconstructing our own constructions’) pushes us to reconsider who we are, as well as what we do, but always in the context of an established order. Our view is that striking moments of lived experience are bound together with generative relations in a process of unsettling established order.

These three intersecting components of our theoretical model provide the basis for the definition of historical reflexivity in the introduction to this chapter. To restate this: historical reflexivity is an iterative process of reflection in which people create nonchronological narratives of their past, present and future practices, informed by their embodied history. Some narratives feature comprehensions (we apprehend, experience and realise) while others feature compositions (we accomplish, make happen and enact). In the following section of the chapter, we give an example of historical reflexivity to illustrate the utility of our theory within HOS.

Illustrating Historical Reflexivity: Faculty Career Achievement in the Corporatized University

We show historical reflexivity through an exploration of how ‘faculty career achievement’ (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Bateson, 1989) is realised in the corporatized university (Parker, 2018; Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen, 2017). In the process of historical reflexivity, people create narratives of realisation that feature comprehensions and compositions. In the following example, we engage in our own historical reflexivity to reflect on how we *comprehend* career success and *compose* our academic careers in an intensified neoliberal university context.

To begin, we share our description of the corporatized university context. Informed by this context, we illustrate our narrative of comprehension with a focus on our striking moments. Our striking moments feature our emotions that are unsettled as we come to grips with a clock whose intensification has become naturalised and justified by a neoliberal ideology. We highlight how our emotions connect nonchronological events: all within one instant, we (re-) live deep connections to our past, present, and future. We come to realize that a consequent impact of the neoliberal university is a growing sense of researcher alienation and loss of meaningful research. The uncomfortable comprehension of faculty career achievement that is informed by an enterprising attitude propels us to invent narratives for change. These are featured in our composition: we rethink notions of academic career achievement by adopting an attitude of improvisation. We suggest the need to reclaim meaningful research and offer that academic achievement may lie in the craft of writing, itself. Throughout our example, we suggest that the sedimentation of our narratives of comprehension and composition overtime makes up and also shifts our embodied history. Because historical reflexivity is not a passive exercise, you, as reader, are invited to envisage your own notion of academic success and react to ours. Doing so may prompt you to invent your own historical narratives for change or guard narratives that sustain an established norm.

The corporatization of the North American and UK university over the past two decades has been lamented by many (Parker 2018; Berg and Seeber 2016; Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen 2017). Though the university may have once been shielded from a neoliberal ideology, its infrastructure, practices and organizational culture have suffered due to changes brought on by an intensified managerialism. As Berg and Seeber (2016: 3-4) note, “our work has changed due to the rise in contractual positions, expanding class sizes, increased use of technology, [and] downloading of clerical tasks onto faculty.” The atmosphere of evaluation, evidenced by a rise in a need for accountability to the university via periodic progress reports, has intensified in light of institutional pressures of accreditation. These changes, and others including a decrease in full-time tenured positions, an increase in demand for research output and service contribution intensify pressures on faculty to *achieve* (Frost and Taylor 1996). If achievement is measured by quantity of publications, then the goal is increasingly met. Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017) note that not only are academic publications on the rise but also the number of academics. In this context, achievement is described as “world-class performance” (Walsh 1996: 481), language that highlights a global competitive mindset, as opposed to a global community. This neoliberal ideology is reticent of a normalized belief in justifying all decisions and actions based on a capitalist logic of efficiency, reason, and rationality as well as assessing survival through economic metrics. The instrumentality fuelled by this belief system has garnered an attitude of

consumerism toward education transforming students into customers and faculty into employees, a fundamental alteration of the relationship.

These changes have meant a significant university reformation, leading to large impacts on the day-to-day lived experience of academics. For example, those once blessed with sentiments of flexibility, creativity, and empowerment associated with tenure may now experience tenure as “working all the time... because academic work by its very nature is never done” (Berg and Seeber, 2016: 3). Consequently, definitions, experiences, and reflections on success and achievement in faculty careers have been re-shaped. Anecdotal comments from our colleagues reveal that this new measure of success reeks of entrepreneurialism: faculty who adopt an ideology, attitude, and work ethic akin to that of an entrepreneur to map their research, teaching, and service have, respective to the new measuring stick, better chances for success.

Our historical reflexivity begins by imagining striking moments that we (our colleagues and ourselves) may experience in light of this current work context. We focus specifically on striking moments because they are the space in which narratives of comprehension are woven. Striking moments are sudden but fleeting glimpses of realizations where new connections are made between elements and associations once deemed unproblematic, normalized, and taken for granted (Corlett, 2013). For example, reflection on tenure and academic success can trigger striking moments in which sudden perception is offered through connecting existing ideas, events or phenomena. Striking moments can happen anywhere, including hallway conversations, and to anyone, such as early or late career academics. These days, the conversations are mostly rushed because everyone is busy, having adopted a mindset of squeezing maximum productivity from each minute of the day. This efficiency, where the logic is to reduce the waste of time to maximize output, is redolent of neoliberalism. It creates a particular image of time, the clock, the intensification of work and thus, the intensification of the clock. It seems that if we do more with less time, the returns move us up one notch on the measuring stick of success. In that moment, questions are triggered: *wasn't the anxiety of the clock supposed to change post-tenure? Why did we think it would?* This can lead to sudden emotions of excitement, anxiety, worry, fear, and happiness as we fuse and re-live nonchronologically the various clocks that make up the enterprising academic career: the tenure clock, the PhD viva clock, the comprehensive examinations clock, the biological reproduction clock (Bateson, 1989), the I must pick up my children clock, the stomach clock... I am hungry... and is it not time for a vacation? More questions on the clock surface... *why does she want to meet at 5pm and not 7pm, I told her this cuts into my writing block, which took me two weeks to create. Do I bother to take the time to explain it, again? Will her reaction be too time consuming? Why do I feel so guilty about this? This thought process is taking up too much time and affecting my focus. Be strategic!* These striking moments connect nonchronological events through emotion. Historical reflexivity suggests that we may never be fully aware of the entire menu of the unconscious acting upon us or, where the emotions come from. As Bollas (2007) notes, the unconscious is generative, it fuels associations between seemingly disparate elements, and we are continually under its influence.

Striking moments unsettle emotions. For example, the flexibility that came with tenure evoked emotions of happiness, contentment, and joy may now also come with emotions of anxiety, tensions, and worry due to intensified work schedules. Interestingly, the corporatization of

academia discourages reflection on emotions associated with an intensified work space and pace. Berg and Seeber (2016: 2) explain that:

“Academic training includes induction into a culture of scholarly individualism and intellectual mastery; to admit struggle undermines our professorial identity. The academy as a whole has been reticent in acknowledging its stress; to talk about the body and emotion goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason.”

For aspiring *enterprising* academics, a significant amount of effort is needed to match inward emotions to those prescribed by the university. This makes us question the extent to which our conventional understanding of career achievement has overlooked the growing dissonance between “inward” feelings and “conventions of expression” (Boddice, 2018: 63). For example, hallway conversations with early career colleagues reveal a growing sentiment of shame when they admit failure in being creative efficiently. Some are genuinely confused; shouldn’t the process of writing unleash happiness and excitement? These dissonances in emotion can lead to what Boddice (2018: 75) calls “emotional suffering.” What examining striking moments allows us to do, is surface and unsettle emotions so we can become acutely attuned to their presence and influence. In our own historical reflexivity, striking moments surface the emotional regime of the neoliberal university, which allows us to critically examine it. The outcome is an emergent narrative of comprehension in which the neoliberal university prescribes an emotional regime akin to that of a corporate environment.

Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017: 12) comment that the neoliberal university has led to the “proletarianization of contemporary academics.” Not only is the academic labour force growing exponentially but so is their research output. The enterprising work ethic supports the collective opinion that playing the publishing game is, by default, the means to manufacture the academic career. However, this neoliberal condition comes with severe compromises to the research. At an individual level, both the process and content of research come to have little intrinsic meaning and value. A growing condition of alienation haunts the academic, where there is potential to become so divorced from one’s labour that meaningless becomes a norm. At a collective level, the value of the research to society is not always evident. As Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017: 5) note, meaningless research is “a serious social problem.”

The narrative of realization above features reflections in which we come to comprehend, in a nonchronological and emotionally saturated way, our construction of academic career achievement. Exploring our narratives of comprehension points our attention to embodied history, and helps surface aspects of it *vis-à-vis* our lived experience. For example, in pointing to our embodied pasts, we may ask whether it was always like this? We recognise that our careers are not long enough for us to know what it used to be and felt like. Engaging in historical reflexivity allows us to acknowledge that as narratives of comprehension are realized over time, they sediment and shift our embodied history. This opens possibilities: an altered embodied past may frame and prompt asking different questions. We may wonder, as did Bateson (1989), whether the design of our lives must be rethought?

So far, we have focused on the illustration of narratives of comprehension and less on narratives of composition. However, engaging in historical reflexivity in practice would imply a co-creation and interaction of both narratives of realisation. This is to highlight that the narratives of comprehension featured above have consequences for narratives of composition, and vice versa. Having noted the separation as heuristic only, we illustrate narratives of composition.

Narratives of composition sharpen our focus on generative relations. This helps us appreciate at least three aspects of composition. First, the emotions that unfold to connect non-chronological events are performative. Second, we can and should be creative in how we compose the problem or subject of our critique, we have agency in that moment. Third, and most relevant for our upcoming example, historical reflexivity is an act of composition. The process invites the composition of thought, emotion, and reflection on past events undertaken in the present and with potential to shape future action.

Our project of historical reflexivity prompted a desire to rethink notions of academic career achievement. Central to this is a redefinition of academic norms of success and failure that follow the neoliberal ready-made model of academic achievement. Ultimately, this involves a reconfiguration of the academic identity away from being “article-producing technicians” (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen 2017: 88). Rather, we explore what generative action is prompted when we adopt a mindset of composing an academic life.

Bateson (1989) teaches us that central to composition is a celebration of agency, improvisation, aesthetics and creativity. Composition problematizes that we can begin with a pre-formulated ending in mind. It cautions us against mindless and “stubborn struggle[s] toward a single goal” (Bateson, 1989: 1). Composition provokes creative flows, with an emphasis on the need to be attentive and identify with those flows to discover their shape along the way. Composition connotes invention through configuring the familiar and unfamiliar elements of our lives into novel forms. This means embracing a continuous combination and recombination of both real and imagined emotions, as well as aspects of dreamworlds, relationships, contexts, and histories. It involves recognising the generative nature of those relations, as a creative aspect of both individual and organizational reflexive engagement. Becoming attuned to composition invites examining resultant configurations, appreciating their aesthetics value and recognising that within them lies possibility for action. Adopting this mindset toward the academic career would tempt us to discover the structure and meaning of success in a fluid way. Our academic careers and notions of success would be discovered along the way, as they are made, thus in the course of their creation. We may even reconfigure academic accomplishment as the act of creating the career, itself. In doing so, we may reconnect with our writing and research to reclaim meaning.

Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017) describe the idea of meaningful research by distinguishing between research that is meaningful to society and that which is meaningful to the ego or identity. Fundamental to reclaiming meaning in research is a need to create and demonstrate the value of academic knowledge to society. This implies a need for academics to question what common good the research serves. Beyond adding value to society, the research process itself, as well as the subjects explored, can and should be meaningful to the researcher. Research has the capacity to evoke curiosity, challenge, and excitement within academics. These emotions can make one come alive, infuse one with purpose, and give a sense of worth. It can help us identify

with the process of doing the research, and fulfil a sense of identity or even “reinstate identity as a crucial part of the research” (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen 2017: 100).

There are a range of options on offer for academics to reclaim meaning in their lives and academic ventures. For one, embracing a style of writing that is audience centric, doing research that is interesting and that can draw and retain audience attention is central to the process of recovering meaning. Beyond this, we argue meaning can be reclaimed when academics embrace that writing is the process in which the self is composed. Our point is that in writing the research article, which multiply over the years to eventually populate pages on a CV and represent the collective of our research over time, we compose the academic self. Saying this implies that our CVs are more than a list of articles. Rather, they are a representation of and a comment on a particular academic identity. As Reynolds and Vince (2020: 140) showed in their historical reflexivity, the history of their publications is a “representation of thought processes unfolding over time, of values that are within and beyond their time, and a shared connection with the future” of their field. As Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017: 93) note, “we are – or become – our intellectual trajectories (or standstills).” It is not possible to predict in the present moment what our CVs will feature in, say, 10 years. For example, what will our list of articles reveal about the subjects we are passionate about, the relationships we forged, the lands to which we traveled for conferences and the students we met along the way who shaped us? What can each piece of research expose about those feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability with which we grappled as we experimented with ideas? It is in those experiences, in the process of writing and forging the content that we also write our self-concept. In writing the research, we write the self. We compose the academic identity in an improvisatory and creative way. The composition *is* the accomplishment. When we look back to our “patchwork of achievements” we can begin to understand it as the composition, rather than a pursuit of “the model of single-track ambition” toward a prescribed goal (Bateson, 1989: 15). These compositions are generative in that they are capable of both unsettling narratives of order and creating possibilities for change.

In our example of comprehending and composing faculty career achievement, we have sought to illustrate historical reflexivity as an iterative process where realizations of comprehension and composition layer over one another and become so taken for granted that their historicity is overlooked. In other words, our embodied history is a sedimentation of narratives of realisation, over time. Each sedimentation presents a shift our embodied history.

Contributions and Conclusions

To create our theoretical model of historical reflexivity, we summarised and combined select aspects of the extant literatures of HOS, reflexivity and emotions in organizations. We did this to give the reader an introduction to both the current state of knowledge in these areas and the functioning of our theory in relation to knowledge development. Effective theories in organization studies generally have two primary characteristics: they should be original and useful. The originality of a theory stems from the creation of insights that reveal new ways of understanding. The utility of a theory recognizes that such insights need to be practical and applicable. Theoretical development, therefore, aims to be prescient, it is focused on “the process of discerning what we need to know” (Corley and Gioia, 2011: 23). Theory captures the intersection between its explanatory power to inform and guide, its relevance to current and

emerging issues, and its role in the discovery of novel connections (Clancy and Vince, 2019). We believe that historical reflexivity is original and holds potential to be useful to workers, managers, students, and (not just) academics. For the sake of its use value as a theory in HOS, we see its contribution as threefold.

First, historical reflexivity attunes us to (what we see is) a novel connection between reflexive practice, the present as well as a future oriented HOS. The rise of history research in organization studies has been premised on the promise of how history can inform innovation thus, new ways of organizing in the future (Cummings et al., 2017). No theoretical framework has been developed in HOS that connects reflexive practice to present and future action. The value of any framework lies in its potential to guide reflexivity, as well as theoretically connect the past, present, and future. Historical reflexivity provides the conceptual means to undertake a nonchronological analysis by recognising that the past, present, and future are all implicated in how we make sense of managing and organizing in the present. Historical reflexivity helps us realize the potential of history by developing new ways to look back *that are connected to* looking forward.

Second, historical reflexivity addresses current and emerging theoretical concerns in HOS in at least two ways. First, historical reflexivity makes explicit the potential of history in the theorization and practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity has a ‘historical’ component. The extent to which current theorizations of history can inform the practice of reflexivity remains un-realised. This is because a theorized study of the past is not explicit in current theorizations of reflexivity. Historical reflexivity makes explicit the role of ‘history’ in the process of reflexivity. As a framework, it seeks to realise the potential of history in reflexive practice by theorizing the role of history in the process of reflexivity. Second, historical reflexivity addresses the emergent theoretical gap of the role of emotions in HOS. The role of emotions in historical thought is a novel area of study in the field of history (Boddice, 2018) but has thus far been neglected in HOS. Historical reflexivity helps us to develop insights on the role of emotions in the organization of reflection.

Third, historical reflexivity holds the capacity to explain, inform, and guide how we make sense of what becomes taken for granted. The practical value of reflexivity is that it identifies and ‘unsettles’ what becomes assumed emotions, knowledge, relations, and structures (Cunliffe, 2003). Although explanations of reflexivity hint at the role of the past, present, and future in the process of unsettling (Pollner, 1991; Cunliffe, 2016a), this aspect of reflexivity is under-realized. Our framework of historical reflexivity focuses on the process of ‘unsettling’ and its relationship to the past, present, and future. For example, practicing historical reflexivity can unsettle assumptions of progress, which imposes a ‘chronological order’ on events, with the assumption that the next event is an improvement on the former. Historical reflexivity unsettles the notion of progress by exposing it as provisional and non-chronological. It presents a novel view of the relationship between historical perceptions (as recursive) and the ongoing questioning of underlying assumptions.

As with any other practice, historical reflexivity comes with methodological warnings. Cunliffe (2003: 991) notes that any reflexive study can flirt with, on one hand, being informative and stimulating while on the other, unenlightening and hollow. We encourage those historical

reflexivity studies that are educational and enlightening. As a final point, we hope that discussions about historical reflexivity can adopt a tone and style that is reflexive in and of itself. Those who practice historical reflexivity can surface the *content* and engage in the *process* reflexively by putting themselves within the reflexive frame, thus as part of the constructing process.

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